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ABSTRACT

Television is composed of multiple cultural and linguistic codes. The understandings that non-native speakers (NNSs) of English in the United States derive from these codes carries important implications for their attitudes toward the host culture and its language, and also for evolution of their second-language identities. A study investigated the television viewing habits of a cross-section of NNSs and their sociocultural effects. Results discussed here pertain to those who watched a great deal of television, with anecdotal evidence offered. Subjects represented a variety of ages and cultural backgrounds. Most reported that their television viewing time was important in practicing English listening while being entertained and accessing important information for daily living and for American acculturation. It is also suggested that television viewing also carries the risk of uncritical consumption which only a portion of the respondents acknowledged. It is concluded that critical viewing skills are needed for television to be a positive language-learning tool in the home environment. In the classroom, television can provide an opportunity for critical engagement of television's varied codes and discovery of new and empowering meanings. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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# U.S. Television and Non-native Speakers of English: Sociocultural and Sociolinguistic Issues

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## Abstract

Television is comprised of multiple cultural and linguistic codes. The understandings non-native speakers (NNS) of English in the U.S. derive from these codes carry important implications as regards how attitudes toward the host culture, the language spoken within it, and evolving second-language identities take shape. This paper discusses the viewing habits of a cross-section of non-native speakers in the U.S. and the sociolinguistic and sociocultural implications of that viewing. The importance of encouraging critical media literacy as part of English as a second language (ESL) curricula is stressed.

## Introduction

Media are one of the U.S.'s largest exports (Brooke, 1994). These exports -- music, television, and film -- are dressed in a language and culture that represent to those from other cultures a particular version of the United States. When non-natives come to the U.S., their expectations have most likely been shaped by a steady diet of these products. Notions of how Americans behave and what they value have been shaped in part from contact with these exports. As evidence, the majority non-native speakers participating in interviews concerning their media contact in the U.S. report incongruence between the images of the U.S. they had formed based on media contact in their home countries and their first-hand observations and experiences in country.

Television programming ultimately legitimates the ideological and social practices of a given culture and society (Reilly, 1995). For non-native speakers of English in the U.S., television represents a window on the culture and society in which they are immersed. Images and ideas represented in this medium get incorporated into an evolving vision of the new environment and one's identity in it. The language and culture with which non-native speakers have had substantial contact before arriving in the U.S., and that occupies a good deal of their leisure time needs to be carefully considered and worked with as part of English as a Second Language curricula. Instructing learners in the skills needed to be a critical consumer of television can benefit both language development and understandings of a social self within the host culture.

### Patterns of Television Viewing

The media practices of non-native speakers of English in the U.S. are likely to be as diverse as their individual backgrounds and personalities. However, results of numerous interviews with non-native speakers concerning their English-language media habits in the U.S. indicate that, while there is a great deal of variation in media preferences and patterns of contact, there are also some instructive trends. Interviews with non-native speakers about their television viewing habits indicate that this population sees television as a means of both recreation and English language contact. Like native speakers, a significant portion of the week is spent watching television for both entertainment and informational purposes. However, non-native speakers are challenged by representations of a language and culture different from their own. As such, their viewing time can be seen as an opportunity for language growth and vicarious engagement with slices of U.S. life.

As regards preferred programming, in situations where groups tend to be homogenous by age and native culture, commonalities are likely. School-age children, for example, are inclined to watch the programs their native-speaking peers watch. This is due to scheduling and peer-generated interest (e.g., there are shows that are "cool" to watch and talk about, and there are those that are not). Likewise, there are topics in the media for which certain groups are enthusiastic. Results of a large-scale media questionnaire for non-native speaker middle school students, for example, revealed a common interest in sea life, sea mammals in undersea serials

and adventures in particular. The same inquiry found that middle school children consistently favored afterschool reruns of situation comedies (Meskill, in press). Like their native-speaker peers, linguistic minority students used these shows as models of popular dress, behavior, and language use.

The majority of interviewees see television as complementary to their linguistic goals and needs for elucidation regarding U.S. culture. They watch moderate amounts of television for these as well as entertainment and informational purposes. Two exceptional groups of non-native speakers, those who watched excessive amounts of television and those who watched none at all, are discussed below.

**-Media as Insulation: Too much of a good thing?**

In some cases, interviews turned up non-native speakers of English who watch television as a means of insulating themselves from the foreign culture in which they are living. These interviewees rationalize their excessive viewing by stating that it is a legitimate form of language practice and, therefore, something they feel justified in spending the majority of their waking hours engaged in. It also represents and a "safe" form of contact with the host environment.

In the most unique interview, a Japanese woman who had lived in the U.S. for two years at the time of her interview reported that she had set up her living room as a high tech language laboratory. She had purchased a closed caption decoder for her large-screen television and recorded shows with English captions on her VCR. These she viewed over and over, stopping, rewinding, viewing portions again, and repeating what she heard out loud. She reported carefully studying the spoken, written, and cultural texts of television as she would a language textbook. Recorded television shows served as material for comprehension (aural and written) and pronunciation practice. These television and VCR activities became her only English-language contact. In describing her adopted lifestyle, this young woman expressed the sense of safety she felt spending her days in this way. She felt she was being productive as regards her language learning and therefore justified in spending all of her time isolated in her "lab" living room. To her, the thought of going out into the English-speaking community was a fearful proposition. Television was a way to escape from more threatening encounters with the target language. She reported that native speakers had a difficult time understanding her and that they were oftentimes rude. She was very aware of her need to learn English and, to her, this was the best way to go about it. Television represented a safe place for her to have contact with the language and culture to which she was very attracted.

An eleven-year-old Korean boy who was interviewed had a similar "lab" set-up in his family room. Apart from video games, television was his sole form of recreation. He watched several hours of television a day, every day of the week. He reported that while viewing, he carefully notes to how English is used both by listening and attending to the closed captions he always chose to have on screen. He also reporting observing U.S. behavior, especially in situation comedies. Where his schoolwork reflected strong reading and writing skills, his social participation in school life was severely limited due in part to his limited oral fluency (chiefly problems with pronunciation) and in part to his preference for safer forms of "interaction" with U.S. society. Again, this non-native speaker's motivation for extensive viewing was the sense of safety his "lab" represented in combination with the sense of legitimacy that productive language acquisition activity with television carried.

In another interview, a mature Chinese academic reported a heavy reliance on media when she initially arrived in the U.S. This reliance tapered off as her linguistic abilities improved and she in turn sought out forms of contact with language and culture beyond her television screen. Recognizing her need to learn English quickly and well, in her first year in the U.S. this woman kept her television on for most of the day, even when not watching it. For almost a year, this was her sole contact with the target language and culture. She felt that during this period her language skills benefited from the talk emanating from the television even when she engaged in


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other tasks around the house. At night, when she finally turned the television off, she turned on the radio and fell asleep to talk shows and music in English. She felt this dormient input greatly improved her ability to comprehend and reproduce the sounds and cadences of the language during her waking hours. Her fluency increased rapidly during this media immersion period, and with it her confidence to seek out additional opportunities to use the language. Without that initial "immersion" through television and radio, she states, she would not have been able to reach that level of confidence and proficiency. She needed to hear English twenty-four hours a day to internalize its sounds and nuances. She benefited from studying the language in use and the cultural behaviors that accompanied it on the television. This case of media immersion ended happily as her intensive initial contact severed as more of a jumpstart than as a refuge from native-speaker contact.

Self-imposed insulation turned up again in the case of two Afghani housewives. In this case, intensive media contact was not brought about by a perceived need to learn English, nor a desire to understand U.S. culture. It was, rather, the result of situational factors. These two housewives reported spending six to eight hours a day watching daytime television. Their explanations for doing so are instructive. First, because they were Muslim, they were expected to stay home. Their husbands, their religious beliefs, and their cultural heritage dictated that their place was in the home, not among those whose beliefs and lifestyles were radically different from their own. Television viewing time, then, simply represented "something to do". The second reason they gave for this extended viewing was that the topics and format of daytime television - chiefly soap operas and talk shows - mirror the kind of daytime activity they were accustomed to engaging in at home - that is, gossip and storytelling. Watching soaps and talk shows became surrogate activity for what they had been accustomed to doing with other women in their villages in Afghanistan. Also, their media contact in their native cultures had been limited to Indian films - another genre characterized by romance, intrigue, and melodrama.

When these women were asked about the English language and U.S. culture they may be picking up from this practice, they both adamantly denied learning English or about the U.S. through their viewing. They stated they had no use for it. They planned to stay in their homes, would eventually return to Afghanistan, and had, therefore, no need for English. Moreover, they had no desire to understand U.S. culture as it was clearly "evil"; the mores and values on television radically contradicted their religious and cultural beliefs and social norms. In short, they had no use, they said, for the U.S. beyond their husbands working here for a short time to earn money.

Interestingly, although these women openly denied any benefit of this media contact to their English language development, they were able, with no formal instruction, to discuss characters, plots, and specific events from the soap operas they viewed *in English* having had no formal ESL instruction. One of the women even let slip out some lines from television commercials she had memorized. On the one hand, it was clear they were picking up language through television. On the other, they were compelled to condemn its content for representing what their religion and culture dictated was taboo.

In addition to these "extreme" cases of television consumption by non-native speakers, several interviewees offered a more moderate profile what they perceived as an important relationship with television. Many referred to the television as a "friend"; as an important tool for finding out about U.S. beliefs and behaviors they were otherwise too reticent to explore through live contact with native speakers. Many pointed out the "low risk factor" of television viewing in contrast to the risky situation of a formal English as a second language classroom, and especially in uncontrived forms of contact with native speakers.


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**The Studious: It's "Just Entertainment"**

A handful of interviewees reported that they felt media was a trivial aspect of their language learning and acculturation goals in the U.S. For this group, time spent watching television was time not spent at more serious forms of study. These "studious" non-native speakers (some school-age children, some adults) felt that they would benefit more from their time in the U.S. if they engaged in formal study. Media contact did not figure in to their notion of what learning English and U.S. culture was all about. To them, media was merely "entertainment" and had nothing to offer their linguistic growth and cultural understandings.

Interestingly, in the case of one teenager from Poland, this view radically changed. Where his initial two years in the U.S. were dedicated to the schoolwork he saw as being of paramount importance to his linguistic growth, this changed when he became bedridden with a long-term illness. During the months he was sick and in bed he watched television all day. He now attributes the leaps he made acquiring the English language and his developed understandings of U.S. cultural practices to that experience.

**Implications of NNS Contact with Television's Linguistic and Cultural Codes**

Television is a medium of potent images. While non-native speakers have limited access to the aural code, they report that television's visuals are a gateway to deriving meaning on a range of levels; from a rudimentary sense of what's going on, to efficient coordination of the intricacies of the aural message with the visual. A great deal of the skill involved in the latter form of coordination of codes comes from television literacy skills in the native language; that is, one's ability to "read" television by virtue of its universal conventions. These universal codes and structures (e.g., narratives, character development, camerawork, visual effects, and the like), in conjunction with the implicit meanings of both the target language visual and aural stream, make television an interpretable medium regardless of strictly linguistic accessibility.

For the most part, non-native speakers report that their media contact time is an opportunity to practice listening to English while enjoying the programming and accessing information that is important to their daily lives (news, sports, local announcements, consumer information, etc). Many articulated this connection between their media contact and their English language development; some reported purposely making use of this contact to improve their language skills; others who had not been aware they were doing so prior to being asked, also reported that this contact time had in fact been productive for language growth. The majority of interviews indicate that non-native speakers perceive television as a useful tool for their language development and as a means to understand the customs and behaviors of the U.S.

Popular media is, by nature, stimulating and evocative. It is aimed by design to provoke and manipulate our emotions. Where this is potentially dangerous, the aspect of emotionality in the medium is nonetheless a feature than can act positively on the language learning process. It motivates sustained attending, touches us deeply, and provokes us to make connections in our minds between its content and our lives and experiences. In short, as we read television, we simultaneously engage its messages in conjunction with what we know about the world. The medium prompts us to suspend disbelief and become thoroughly engaged and even engrossed in its presentation.

The language scholar Earl Stevik has long contended that depth of engagement with language is critical for learners of another language. (Stevik, 1978). The form of engagement he refers to is that which takes place in the processes of meaningful and motivated communication with other human beings. When we are thoroughly engaged and involved in the making and understanding of meaning, he proposes, we are in a psychological state conducive to language acquisition. In other words, we transcend the self-consciousness of explicit learning and enter into activity that is directly aiding the internalization of the language we are using. The


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emotionality dimension of media can induce a like state of receptivity and depth of processing. In other words, when we are carried by plots, characters, and action to a state of thorough engagement, our minds are particularly well tuned to understanding and, in turn, acquisition. Non-native speaker interviewees generally reported that television was an important source of information and entertainment as well as a convenient tool to enhance their language acquisition processes. However, the engaged, receptive state that television induces also carries the risk of uncritical consumption. Some interviewees revealed a healthy skepticism regarding how closely television reflects real people, real events, real concerns, and ways of thinking and being that differed from their native societies. Others did not.

**Critical Viewing Skills**

The degree of media's influence on the development of beliefs, attitudes, and sense of self has been widely documented (see, Hall, 1959; McLaren et al, 1995; NIH, 1982; Pipher, 1995). Television, by virtue of its multimodal presentation possibilities and its ever expanding technical innovation, is a medium that is dense with possibilities for meaning. Moreover, the potential for interpretations of its multiple elements is vast. That is, like text, there is no single "reading" (Fiske, 1987). However, unlike other texts, television is, if not recorded off air, evanescent and consequently less open to inquiry and reflection. There is, therefore, the risk of uncritical contact with ideological codes that are markedly American: individualism, notions of race and class, and materialism, for example. Such social messages can be alternately "bought" or reconfigured in conjunction with one's native culture experiences and beliefs. For example, U.S. individualism is a message non-native speakers from cultures where collective identities are valued are likely to misconstrue. In a cross-cultural television viewing study, Katz & Liebes found that middle easterners watching the dramatic serial *Dallas* misread messages about a female character's intentions. These viewers could not 'read' a woman acting independently of her family and community's wishes (Katz & Liebes, 1984).

On the other side of the potential for misconstruing cultural codes, is the risk of uncritically buying into those codes. In the case of television's coding of materialistic values, as a commercially driven phenomenon the medium creates and reinforces intrinsic ties between consumerism and social identity. This is a potentially insidious message for newcomers to the U.S. and their children who find themselves in a situation where they must re-evolve a second, English-speaking identity. A society that tends to prize homogeneity and to hold difference in disdain represents a particularly problematic context for the growth and development of a non-native U.S. identity. The almost fanatical preoccupation with material goods and consumption portrayed on television carries the risk of wholesale adoption of materialistic values at the expense of intergenerational family ties and native culture Young and old risk focusing on the material at the expense of their authentic cultures and identities (Wong-Fillmore, 1991).

Television programs can take on a new life and reveal new meanings depending on the social contexts in which they are viewed, discussed, and referred to. In ESL instruction, where emphasis is on the acquisition of language, there is a risk of singular meanings and conveying the sense that there are singular, sanctioned meanings in television. That is, the tendency when talking about television programs and using off-air recordings in language classes is for the instructor to explicate sequences as a way of assisting student comprehension of language and content, present models of language in use, and use off-air sequences as representations of U.S. culture in action (Stempleski & Acario, 1994).

Given the amount of viewing non-native speakers engage in on a daily basis and the fact that the same material is often used in the ESL classroom, NNS could personally benefit from having their attention drawn to those television codes that underlie surface linguistic forms. Classroom practice, in other words, can open up television viewing for critical exploration and exploit it for its discourse opportunities, both of which can expand the positive influences and benefit of television viewing for non-native speakers. Moreover, the discourse around television viewing is part of the majority of folk cultures in the world. In other words, "TV talk" serves a


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social solidification purpose. In ESL classrooms, opportunities for critical engagement of television's codes can help expand interpretations and lead to the discovery of new and empowering, rather than constricting, meanings. Critical discussion, in other words, can work towards an active and proactive relationship with television in lieu of a passive/receptive one. In short, in addition to using television as a resource for language study, educators can use television as a way of supporting and valuing different perspectives and to liberate students to become active, critical viewers (Figure 1).

For all parents and teachers, exploring with children especially how their subjectivities are being shaped by the media that pervade their lives is essential. It is even more critical when children and/or their parents are from another culture. Wholesale, unbridled, non-reflective consumption of media risks devaluing non-native speaker children's sense of self even more than it does for U.S. children. They are, after all, consuming something that starkly underscores that they are *different* from the idealized models of U.S. society they see and hear about. This is potentially harmful to self image if thoughtful, critical viewing is not explicitly taught.

**Recommendations**

By nature, television is an object of transmission. The impressions television's transmitted sounds and images leave need a context, time, and skills to sort through. Non-native speakers in the U.S. can benefit from opportunities to step back, consider linkages and implications, and develop critical understandings of what is presented and represented on television. In the ESL classroom, television can be cast in roles that are quite different from trivial, fleeting representations of a U.S. way of life. Television can be a tool for understanding and a catalyst for meaningful, motivated discourse. It can be actively used to provoke thought and discourse as opposed to passive consumption. By standing back and gaining a reflective distance on their interactions with television, by mastering the discourse that describes the experience, non-native speakers can become writers of meaning rather than uncritical readers of others' agendas. They can begin to attend to their own identities as media consumers and how these risk being shaped by the power and pervasiveness of the media they consume. Like all television viewers, non-native speakers have tremendous control over what they watch on television. The nurturing of thoughtful choices of, and critical perspectives on that viewing can assist them in *how* they view not only U.S. life, but themselves as participants.


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